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With LES WHITTEN

WASHINGTON — Confidential cables from the U.S. embassy in Taiwan report that South Vietnam's deposed President Nguyen Van Thieu wants to settle permanently in the United States.

American diplomats have done their best, however, to discourage the idea. They fear that the Vietnam issue is still too hot and that Thieu's arrival might touch off demonstrations.

But they fully expect Thieu will eventually move to the United States. As one source put it: "It's not a question of if; it is a question of when."

Thieu left office on April 21 with a withering blast at the U.S. He charged that U.S. failure to support his regime was the major cause of its disintegration.

He fled Saigon shortly before the victorious Communists moved in and he secured refuge in Taiwan. He is now ensconced in a five-bedroom house in a residential compound outside Taipei.

Behind the high walls are a swimming pool and a garden, where Thieu lolls in seeming tranquility. But the embassy cables indicate that Thieu is unhappy in Taipei and would like to join the South Vietnamese community in America.

Footnote: The Chinese Nationalists, who respect Thieu as an "anti-Communist leader," provide him with police protection. Their main function, apparently, is to keep the press at bay. Thieu has refused to give out interviews.

TELEPHONE MONITORING: The Central Intelligence Agency monitored all telephone calls between the United States and Latin America for three months, apparently without the knowledge of the telephone company.

We checked into this illegal telephone monitoring several months ago. Both the CIA and the Bell System flatly denied the story. Now the Rockefeller Commission has confirmed that the calls were monitored in late 1973 until the CIA's general counsel put a stop to it.

A spokesman for the Bell System still assures us the company "had no knowledge of any wiretapping by the CIA and did not at any time provide any assistance to the agency in connection with wiretapping, eavesdropping or otherwise monitoring of any telephone calls between the United States and any foreign countries, including those in Latin America."

We have learned, however, that the Bell System provided the CIA with traffic information on calls between the U.S. and both Russia and China.

This information, a spokesman explained, "was not furnished with respect to any particular callers but rather on all calls. It included only the names, telephone numbers and locations of the parties involved and the date, time and duration of any completed calls. The information provided did not disclose the content of any conversation."

WORLD TRAVELER: The delightful if irascible Helen Delich Bentley, who is awaiting reappointment as chairwoman of the Federal Maritime Commission, hasn't spent much time on the job.

She has been too busy seeing the world. In 1974, for example, she took 36 trips to such pleasure spots as Geneva, London, Paris, San Francisco and her hometown of Reno. Her airline bills cost the taxpayers more than \$15,000.

Partly as a result of her constant

junketing, the cases before the Federal Maritime Commission are backlogged four years. Her fellow commissioners have pleaded with her to attend to her duties, but she has merely given them the brush-off.

Two commissioners, Clarence Morse and Ashton Barrett, were willing to go on the record. They called Ms. Bentley a poor administrator. "She's a square peg in a round hole," said Morse.

They complained that she treated the commission as her personal domain. For instance, they said she usually ties up both of the commission's available limousines on personal errands. Her chauffeur has his own office near here, they said.

Besides flying all over the world at government expense, Ms. Bentley also loves ship christenings. At one christening, she received a valuable pin, studded with diamonds and rubies, from Avondale shipyards.

She accepted the gift, she told us, "as a patriotic gesture because it is in the shape of an American flag." She promised us that she would return it after she leaves office.

She has also accepted other gifts at

ship christenings, including a bracelet which she gave to a niece and a large wooden frame which hangs in her office.

In the past, we have also exposed Ms. Bentley's habit of twisting the arms of shipping tycoons for political contributions. Here is a rundown:

—In 1972, she collected at least \$20,000 in donations for the Nixon campaign from the shipping industry she is supposed to regulate.

—In 1974, she toyed with the idea of running against Sen. Charles Mathias, R.-Md. It was reported that her backers, under the name "Friends of Helen Bentley," solicited political contributions from the practitioners whose appearances before the commission had been listed. She denied any knowledge of the misuse of the lists.

As for her world wanderings, she said the trips were official business as she defines the guidelines. She also insisted that, so far as she knew, the commission has only two cases pending.

A White House spokesman told us, meanwhile, that she is the only person now under consideration for the Maritime Commission chairmanship.